

Russian Roulette

By Georges Surdez

The strange case of Sergeant Burkowski, who died many deaths, and his friend Feldheim, who had to explain one of them to their superior officers

LIEUTENANT:

An official request for further explanations concerning the death by suicide of Sergeant Burkowski last month has arrived from Regimental Headquarters in Meknes. Before making another report of the affair, I believe it is better to inform you of the circumstances, so that you may advise me about what to say and what not. In my nine years in the Foreign Legion this exact situation never came up before. I may seem to criticize a man who is not only a dead man but who was also my superior in rank. The Lieutenant has known me for some years and cannot misunderstand my honest intentions.

A few months ago, I was sent here to Bou Khous Blockhouse to replace the second in command, invalidated to Algeria at his own request. I liked Sergeant-Chief Burkowski from the start, there never was a quarrel between us, no bad words exchanged—unless you count the times when he would say, "Feldheim, you thick-skulled German," and, if there were no inferiors about to overhear, I would say something about "crazy Russians." I am aware, of course, that personalities and nationalities are against regulations in the Legion, but the Lieutenant knows how such things go.

Sergeant Burkowski, as you may know, talked like all Russians. That is, he was a bit boastful about what he had been, how much money he had had, the schools he had been to. And, like all Russians, he thought he was a gambler. He would gamble or bet on anything, any time, whether he had the money to pay or not. And he was very lucky. I do not gamble as a rule, but what with boredom here in the mountains and the fact that he was my superior, from time to time I would risk small sums which he invariably won. On anything—the number of nails missing in a Legionnaire's boots, a date in history, how many shots would be fired by some sniper during the night.

THOSE small sums, when added at the end of a month, amounted to more than you might think.

One month, September, my entire pay went to Sergeant Burkowski. I decided to stop playing with him and told him so. He said that he was not surprised, that Germans were methodical, not speculative, and that this was both their strength to start with and their weakness at the end. I let that go. He was my superior.

And he is dead and cannot be brought to account, and as this is a private communication, Lieutenant, I may say that Sergeant Burkowski craved gambling so badly that he would gamble even with the Legionnaires. Four different times I warned him it was not right for a sergeant to play cards or bet with corporals and privates. But he told me he knew more about Communism than I would ever learn, and that discipline was not maintained by growls and kicks in the pants anywhere except in Germany. That is an exaggeration. I have known men who had served in the German army and had never been kicked. But I could not argue with him, a superior.

Before long, nobody would gamble or bet with him. And he grew so nervous that it was pitiful. One night, after we had finished dinner, he takes out his revolver, a '92 model, and looks at me.

"Feldheim," he says, "did you ever hear of Russian Roulette?"

When I said I had not, he told me all about it. When he was with the Russian army in Rumania, around 1917, and things were cracking up, so that their officers felt that they were not only losing prestige, money, family and country, but were being also dishonored before their colleagues of the Allied armies, some officer would suddenly pull out his revolver, anywhere, at the table, in a café, at a gathering of friends, remove a cartridge from the cylinder, spin the cylinder, snap it back in place, put it to his head and pull the trigger. There were five chances to one that the hammer would set off a live cartridge and blow his brains all over the place. Sometimes

it happened, sometimes not. When it did, there was nothing more to be said or done; when it didn't, the fellow waited another day.

And as he explained, Burkowski removed a cartridge from the gun, spun the cylinder with his thumb, snapped it shut without looking at it. He said something about me never understanding the thrill of it, put the muzzle against his temple, and pressed the trigger. There was a click.

HE GRINNED and seemed to feel better.

At least six times during the winter, Lieutenant, he did the same thing. It made me very nervous, as I knew I would have to give explanations.

A month ago, he gets a letter from England. He had had a sister there, who had married a wealthy Britisher long before the war. She had died and he was inheriting part of her money. As nearly

as we could figure, it was almost a million francs. His enlistment had six months to run, then he would be free to spend the money. He had not seen his sister in twenty years, and did not feel badly on her account.

I made a foolish remark about his having been lucky not to shoot himself. That made him smile queerly. He told me that the money would soon be gone, and that stinking life would go on. He said "stinking life." And he told me he would give himself a chance to escape it. This time he took out five cartridges and left one, reversing the order of chances. And he spun the cylinder under the table, snapped it shut. I tried to argue with him, and he laughed at me.

"Listen," I started to tell him, "you'll lose this time, and I'll explain why."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"No. But I have a theory as to why—" I wanted to go on.

(Continued on page 57)



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ILLUSTRATED BY ALEX RAYMOND

AMONG the smash hits on Broadway this season have been John Gielgud's performance of Hamlet and a musical hurdy-gurdy called Red, Hot and Blue, in which Ethel Merman and Jimmy Durante cavort. This proves, among other things, that the theater public has versatile tastes. It also proves that Mr. Gielgud, who has been famous in England for some years but almost unknown in the United States, is really a great actor.

The sterling quality of Gielgud's performance and the fact that Leslie Howard, matinee idol and movie star, also did a Hamlet, have renewed an ancient controversy.

Gielgud didn't want to go into the competition with Leslie Howard. He had planned to put on Hamlet in New York last year and had delayed his production when he heard that Howard was also going to present the neurotic Dane. Then Leslie put off his own production until last fall. Gielgud could postpone things no longer and he prepared, with no small misgivings, for the fray.

His alarm was based partly on a sense of inferiority which gripped him whenever he thought of Leslie Howard. For Leslie had had far more experience and was infinitely better known. Worst of all, he is extremely handsome, while Gielgud, whose nose is much too big, must depend wholly on his gifts as an actor. The inferiority stemmed, too, from an occasion seven or eight years ago when Gielgud was hired to be Howard's understudy.

A revival of John Balderstone's Berkeley Square was being put on in London with Leslie Howard as the star. Gielgud, in addition to being understudy, was to have played the part at special matinees which Howard could not appear in, due to prior engagements. It was Gielgud's big chance, as he was still unknown. At a rehearsal, however, the producer, Gilbert Miller, appeared.

"Who's that young man?" he barked when he saw Gielgud. Informed of his identity, he said that the actor was in no way qualified. So Gielgud never got his opportunity.

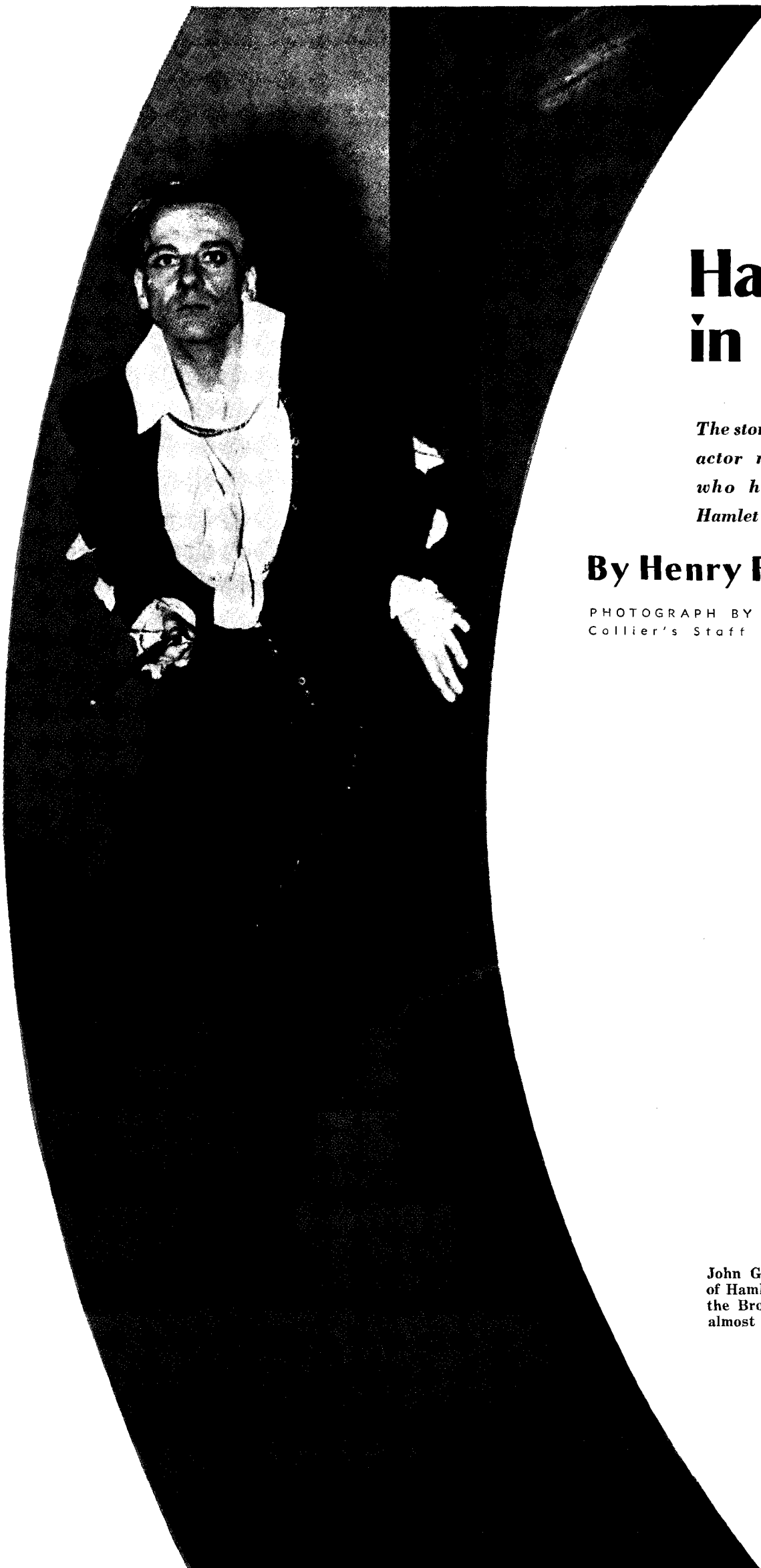
Alas, Poor Howard

The complex toward Leslie Howard must be fading now. John Gielgud's Hamlet opened first on Broadway and was received with almost hysterical acclaim. When Leslie gave his own version, some weeks later, the comparisons were caustic. The most penetrating of them, curiously enough, came from Libby Holman, once renowned as a torch singer. Miss Holman may not be an authority on Shakespeare but she knows what she likes. She had been to a Gielgud performance. Then she dropped in to watch Howard.

"I hope," she observed at the end of the first act, "that they've got Walter Hampden warming up in the wings."

Times change, and with them changes the appearance of actors. John Gielgud, who is thirty-two years old, bears no resemblance to the Shakespeare tragedians of the old school. He strikes no poses. He can go for days without quoting Shakespeare. He is a pleasant-appearing young man of medium height. He has blue eyes, and his light-brown hair is slicked back over his rather high forehead. His nose is undeniably large, a handicap which does not depress him unduly and which is annoying only when people suggest, as they tactlessly do, that he could play Cyrano without building up his proboscis with putty.

John Gielgud is well-tailored, polite and very British. He may not spout Shakespeare, but he talks pretty incessantly. And being an actor, a due proportion of the talk is about himself. He holds forth on the peculiarities of audiences and how they can make or mar



Hamlet in High

The story of a very lively actor named Gielgud who has geared up Hamlet into a smash hit

By Henry F. Pringle

PHOTOGRAPH BY IFOR THOMAS
Collier's Staff Photographer

John Gielgud, in the role of Hamlet, was received by the Broadway critics with almost hysterical acclaim